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Cold War Neons and Socialist Modernity

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COLD WAR NEONS

In the common imaginary of the West, gray was the colour of the communist city; the drab and uniform tone punctuated only by the red of the flags and the lettering of slogans. This ideological urban myth could be unsettled by the remaining artefacts of the communist era in Warsaw, such as neon signs. Displaced by printed advertising and cheap signage, the evidence of the little known urban phenomenon of the “neonisation” of the communist city in the 1960s has been disappearing, leaving only street photographs to attest to the spectacular aspects of its “socialist modernity.”

After the death of Stalin and the political changes of 1956, Warsaw was released from its Socialist Realist shackles, and allowed to become modern. Mies-inspired buildings appeared in the city centre, and elaborate neon signs sprouted on rooftops and building façades. Architectural and design journals called for surrounding the citizen with beauty, light, and clarity of form and discussed the modern uses and the “compositional-aesthetic sense” of light in architecture. References to the fantasy and “magic of city lights and advertising” and “illuminated composition” highlighted the role of graphic space in urban design. Echoed in films, photographic albums, and illustrated magazines, the coordinated spectacle of light, colour surface, exuberant graphics and playful lettering instantiated the city’s metropolitan ambitions. The modern socialist street was posited as evidence of aesthetic taste, sophistication, and “European elegance.”

The celebration of light and colour, however, was to be neither spontaneous nor chaotic as chaos was seen as characteristic of capitalist cities and their “obscene spatial compositions.” In a socially progressive city, technology, industry, art and urban detail were to meet in the careful choreography of neon signs that constructed the “proper” image of the socialist metropolis. That is to say that what was called for was not “the nonsensical fashion for neons” poorly synchronised with architecture, but rather the careful design of the “street interior” entailing order, harmony, and centrally coordinated urban composition.

At first, the term “neonisation” referred critically to the visual noise on the urban surface. Later, the term came to mean the comprehensive programme developed and implemented in the 1960s and carried out through the 1970s by the special office of the Chief City Designer, which coordinated the harmonious design of “night architecture” with the city’s daytime image. The office functioned from 1972 to 1991 alongside that of the Chief Architect of the City of Warsaw and was responsible for the aesthetics of the public space, urban signage and advertising and all issues related to information and decoration in the city.

The “Neonisation Programme” established an elaborate design and approval process requiring the careful consideration of site, building scale and detail, the context of other signs, relevant views, colour sequences, as well as the signs’ graphic form, typography, and even the wording. The technical aspects of signs, their sequences of switching, as well as specifications for their materials and mechanisms, were also part of the stringent approval process. Most importantly, the neon signs were not treated in isolation, and the approval process was not a mere regulatory formality. The design of urban signage and advertising was seen as an important component of the urban interior that required overall vision, comprehensive planning, and a coordinated implementation process. It was this organisation of the urban visual environment, this careful spatial order, that was seen as characteristic of the socialist city and its specific brand of modernity. While models for brightly lit streets were taken from Western cities, capitalism continued to be associated with arbitrary, spontaneous development, visual disorder, and uncontrolled competition for attention. In contrast, socialist modernity was presented as comprehensively and carefully planned and backed up by a high level of professional skills and intricate institutional structures. The Neonisation Programme relied upon the expertise of graphic designers, artists and architects, hence the design of signage and advertising became an important source of revenue for them. The approval documents provide an astonishing testament to the quality expected and the attention to detail demanded of their projects.

The neons were not simply added to the existing buildings or positioned in available spaces. They were designed into the buildings’ exteriors forming hypersurfaces, as it were, enveloping and outlining the buildings, working with their form and detail, highlighting their silhouettes. Often they were designed together with the buildings that supported them, and at times even set up prior to building’s construction – functioning as announcements of the planned developments. Designed for their nighttime impact, the neons retreated during the daylight, leaving only a delicate line of writing visible against the sky, or the building surface. Like the posters also highly visible on the streets of Warsaw at the time, they were used in the rhetoric of modernity, a claim for the Polish contribution to European (Western) culture and an assertion of the superiority of the socialist model of modernity and its vision for the role of art and design in shaping urban space and modern life.

THE EXHIBITION

Urban surfaces manifest and amplify attitudes and ambitions (artistic, social, political) and the tensions and fusions between art and architecture, design and technology, visual media and built form. In the 1960s, when Tom Wolff wrote with excitement on the role of neon signs in the American cityscape, the urban surfaces of Warsaw were already shaped by “electrographic architecture”. They registered and expressed ambitions to manifest modernity and a cosmopolitan European style awakened after the political thaw of the 1950s.

The exhibition **Cold War Neons and Socialist Modernity** centres on the cityscape of Warsaw in the 1960s and 1970s as documented through two sets of lenses. One belongs to local photo-reporters of the period clearly fascinated with the material evidence of modernity in the streets. (These photographs are from the collection of the NAC/PAP-CAF in Warsaw). The other, specifically directed at neon signs, belongs to a German photo-reporter, Hans-Joachim Orth, who in his colour slides amassed a unique documentation of design culture in communist Poland. (These photographs are from the collection of the Herder-Institut in Marburg). These two bodies of work are brought into relation with one another in the context of the project of “Neonisation” – a comprehensive design programme developed and implemented in Warsaw in the 1960s to promote modernity and design as forces shaping the socialist city.

While showcasing the playful, exuberant and colourful signs of the times, the exhibition questions assumptions about the visual landscapes of the Cold War era through references to the contemporary cultural discourse on socialist modernity. The exhibition is composed as a visual essay that examines the role of neon lights and graphic design in modernizing the socialist capital of Poland, and more generally, the role of art and design in shaping the space and the aesthetics of the urban everyday. Curated by Dr Ella Chmielewska of The University of Edinburgh, the exhibition forms a part of a larger research project on the iconosphere of Warsaw conducted in a partnership with the Herder-Institut Marburg.

Dr ELLA CHMIELEWSKA teaches cultural and visual studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her visual practice, research and teaching interests centre on urban visual landscapes, place and visual language, information environments and design cultures. She has published articles and chapters on graffiti, inscriptions, logos and branding, place and memory, photography and visual culture. Though her urban photographs have been exhibited and circulated as objects in private collections, she is most interested in their use in research. She is currently completing an experimental (text)book *Text and the City* (Universitätsverlag Göttingen), and a book project *Warsaw Neons and Socialist Modernity* in which the history of socialist neons is situated within a comprehensive study of the urban iconosphere and urban representations.

HERDER-INSTITUT Marburg

The visual archive at the Herder Institute contains around 4500 slides by the Düsseldorf-born (1922) journalist Hans-Joachim Orth. Most photographs document his visits to the socialist People’s Republic of Poland that commenced in 1956. While expressing Orth’s preoccupation with scenes of everyday life, the images provide insights into the social and economic development of the country in its larger urban centres (Warsaw, Poznań, Wrocław, Gdańsk). Trade fairs and industrial exhibitions (e.g. Targi Poznańskie) often formed the impetus for his coverage, resulting in numerous contributions to West German media. His portrayal of socialist everyday life and culture follows a personal, distinctly Western European perspective. Notably, Orth worked with professional medium-format colour slides, a rarity in Poland at the time. The digitised and catalogued slides, as well as the accompanying written documentation are available for research at the Herder Institute in Marburg.

NATIONAL DIGITAL ARCHIVES (Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe NAC)

As a central state archive the NDA (NAC) stores and manages archival material of Polish media institutions and agencies. The current collection, based on an earlier collection established in 1955, includes almost 14 million photographs (in addition to films and audio recordings). The material from the Central Photographic Agency CAF (1944-1990) is of particular importance for this exhibition and for research of the visual landscape of Warsaw. The collection contains photographs by Warsaw press photographers who documented the city’s major developments and its everyday events.

NEONISATION FILES

The Office of the Chief City Designer of Warsaw kept detailed records of all its activities, but only a portion of the neonisation files have survived to this date. Located by Dr Chmielewska in 2003 (following the information obtained from Mr Stanisław Soszyński, the Chief City Designer from 1972 to 1991), and reclassified and archived by the staff of the City of Warsaw Archive, the files provide unique insight into the history of design and of socialist urban space and advertising. Each file submitted for approval contains the documentation of the existing condition of the site, a detailed rendering of the proposed sign (including a simulated night condition, the colours and the sequence of lighting), details of the graphics and lettering, building elevation drawn at 1:100, and siting and technical specifications. These files are complemented by the documentation retained by the then state owned but now privately run company REKLAMA, who in the 1960s and 1970s was the main producer of neon signs in Poland. The documentation preserved by the producer gives information on the conditions of production and maintenance. This documentation together with the surviving knowledge and experience of REKLAMA has made possible the restoration of a few neons in Warsaw.

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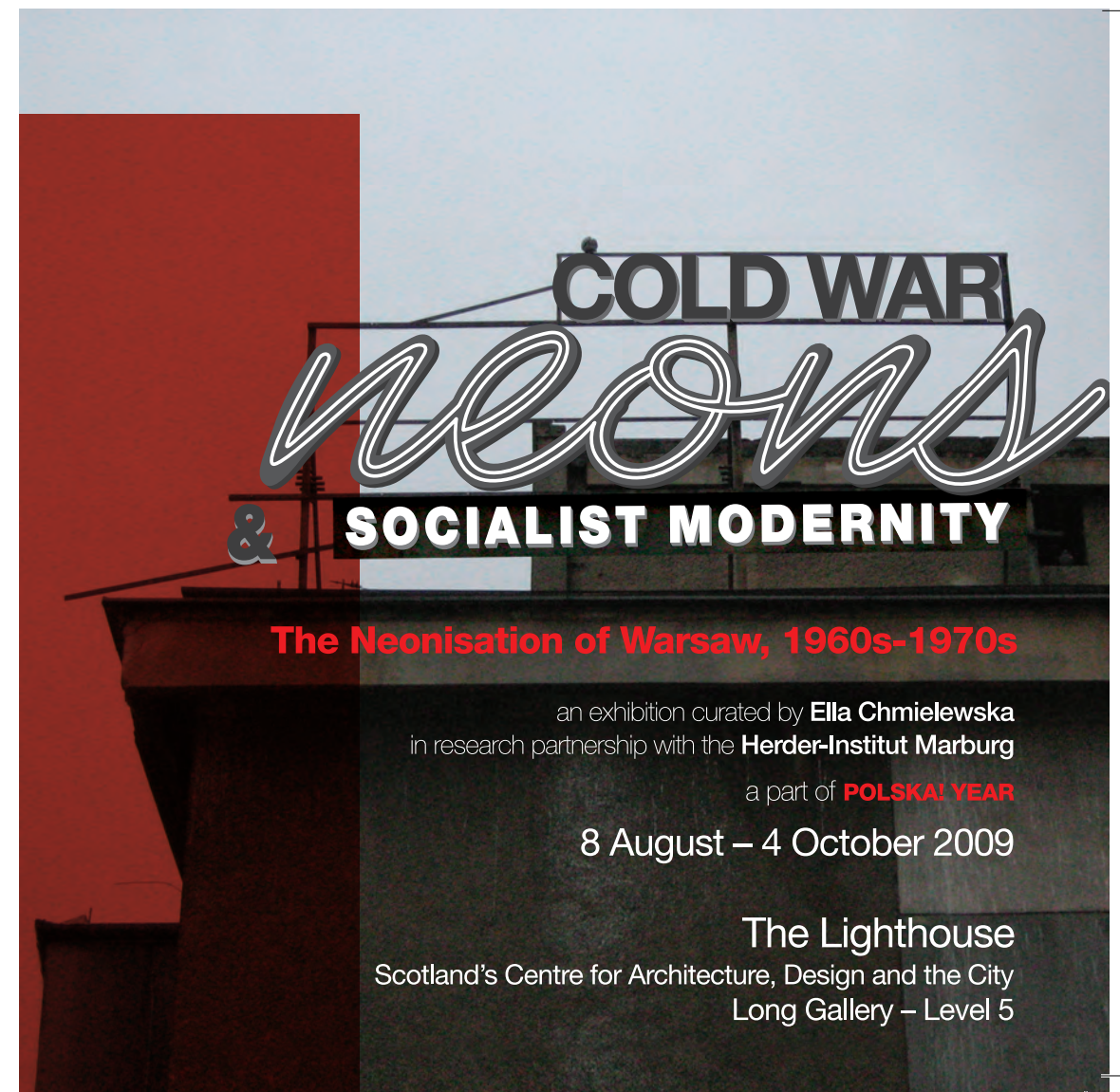
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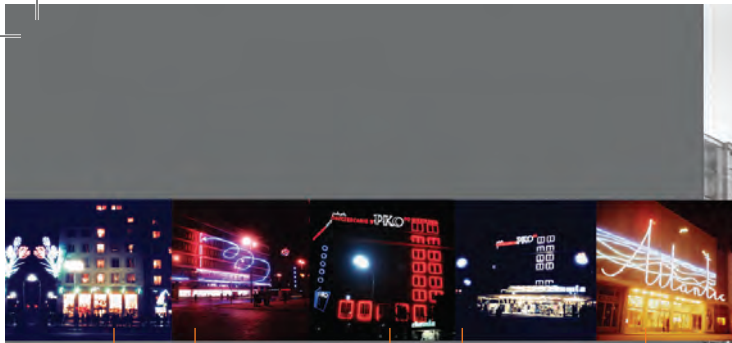
POLSKA! YEAR comprises over 200 projects presenting the most interesting achievements of Polish culture to the UK audience. **POLSKA! YEAR** is a joint initiative by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The cultural programme is coordinated by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, which is responsible for the promotion of Polish culture abroad.

To find out more visit www.PolskaYear.pl

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Neon sign **KWIATY** (floral shop) Aleje Jerozolimskie at Krucza Street, 1967.
Photo: PAP/CAF- Edmund Uchymiak.

Neon sign **BAR Gruba Kaśka**, Aleja Solidarności, 1967.
Photo: PAP/CAF- Edmund Uchymiak.

Neon sign, **KWIATY** (floral shop) Aleje Jerozolimskie at Krucza Street, 1965.
Photo: PAP/CAF- Bolesław Miedza.

Neon sign **Cepelia*** (folk-art chain store), Marszałkowska Street at Aleje Jerozolimskie, 1974. Photo: PAP/CAF- Marian Sokołowski.

Neon sign **HERBATNIKI** (cookies) Senatorska Street, 1966.
Photo: PAP/CAF- Edmund Uchymiak.

Neon sign **PKO** (National Saving Trust), Marszałkowska Street and Aleje Jerozolimskie, 1970. Photo: PAP/CAF- Marian Sokołowski.

Neon sign, cinema **Atlantic**, Chłodna Street, 1961.
Photo: Hans-Joachim Orth / Herder-Institut Bildarchiv.

Neon sign **PKO** (National Saving Trust), Nowogrodzka at Bracka Street, 1966/1961.
Photo: Hans-Joachim Orth / Herder-Institut Bildarchiv.

Neon sign **BAR Gastronomia**, Nowy Świat at Smolna Street, 1966.
Photo: PAP/CAF- Edmund Uchymiak.

Neon sign **CDT** (Central Department Store), Aleje Jerozolimskie at Bracka Street, 1965.
Photo: Hans-Joachim Orth / Herder-Institut Bildarchiv.

Neon sign **KINO** (cinema POLONIA) Marszałkowska Street, 1967.
Photo: PAP/CAF- Henryk Rosiak.

Neon sign, **Dancing***, Nowy Świat, 2003.
Photo: Ella Chmielewska.

Neon sign **KWIATY** (floral shop), Aleje Jerozolimskie at Krucza Street, 1965.
Photo: Hans-Joachim Orth / Herder-Institut Bildarchiv.

Neon sign, cinema **Skarpa**, Przybosa Street, 2008.
Photo: Ella Chmielewska.

Backlit sign, **Skala** (the logo, drafting supplies producer), Pasaż Rowickiego, 2003. Photo: Ella Chmielewska.

Portraits of Warsaw's neon signs, 1956-65.
Photo: Hans-Joachim Orth/ Herder-Institut Bildarchiv.

* signs still in existence

Neon signs planned for a new building along Kijowska Street, a project designed by Z. Żerdzicki and J. Kalinowski, 1974.
Fragment of drawing at 1:200, Archiwum Miasta st. Warszawy.

In the approval documents the project is considered an innovation in the design of neon signs. Never realised, the project was developed in anticipation of the "invasion of advertising" in the district located along the East-West railway line. The designers argued for control over the growth of advertising in the area and for a phased project that ensured the "completed composition" at every stage of the development of a project that they referred to as "a cloud of neons over the neighbourhood."



Neon sign, the logo of TOTALIZATOR SPORTOWY (National Lottery), Tamka Street, 1966.
Photo: PAP/CAF- Stanisław Czarnogórski.

Aleje Jerozolimskie at Krucza Street, 1965.
Photo: Hans-Joachim Orth/ Herder-Institut Bildarchiv.

